



Weaponisation of rape: Women and girls in African conflict zones

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Abstract: Rape in war is a deliberate strategy not a tragic byproduct. Political inaction, legal loopholes and failed peace processes make leaders complicit. Protecting women means prosecuting perpetrators, empowering communities and rejecting silence. The time for impunity is over.

Across Africa's [conflict zones](#) from Rwanda to Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the Central African Republic (CAR), the bodies of women and girls are not only collateral in war, they are its battleground. [Rape](#) in these contexts is not incidental. It is strategic, systemic and deliberate. Far from rogue crimes of opportunity, sexual violence has become a weapon of war wielded to humiliate, displace, dominate and destroy. Conflicts that remain unresolved through diplomatic channels and continue to be negotiated behind closed doors are perpetuating cycles of impunity and violence, particularly against the most vulnerable. When peace processes lack transparency and inclusivity, especially

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the voices of women and survivors, they create fertile ground for the weaponisation of rape.

The 2024 [UNICEF Report](#) highlights that over 79m girls and women, more than one in five across sub-Saharan Africa have been subjected to rape or sexual assault before reaching the age of 18. As a case in point, the eastern DRC has for over a decade recorded the world's highest rates of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). In 2024, more than 100 female prisoners were [raped and burned alive](#) during a jailbreak in Goma, eastern DRC. In just the first two months of 2025, nearly [10,000 cases](#) of rape and sexual violence were reported, up to 45 per cent involving children. One child is raped every 30 minutes at the peak of the violence. The horror is replicated elsewhere: in [Sudan](#), the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have turned cities like Khartoum, Bahri, and Omdurman into epicentres of gang rapes, forced marriages and sexual slavery. In [Ethiopia](#), Nigeria and South Sudan, armed groups have raped women, girls and [infants](#), often in public or in front of family members. Men and boys are also victims, though they are frequently rendered invisible by patriarchal myths that deny [male vulnerability](#) and enforce 'hierarchies of rape'.

Under [international law](#), rape and other forms of sexual violence [acts](#) used systematically in conflict constitute war crimes and, when part of a widespread or systematic attack on civilians, crimes against humanity. Despite the existence of mechanisms by the United Nations and African Union intended to prevent such atrocities, African leaders have largely failed to act decisively. Even as [heads of state](#) convene in Addis Ababa and beyond, survivors remain unheard, unprotected, and without justice. The weaponisation of rape continues unabated with women and girls on the frontlines.

A calculated weapon: a failing system

Rape in conflict is not merely an act of violence but a strategic weapon used to further genocide, displacement and ethnic cleansing. Its impact is worsened by the collapse of health systems. From the [Rwandan genocide](#) to current wars in Sudan and the DRC, women's and girls' bodies have become battlegrounds. In [Sudan](#), with [80 percent](#) of hospitals in conflict-affected areas not functioning, access to reproductive health care is severely limited, leading to a rise in pregnancy-related deaths. [UNICEF has reported](#) that girls as young as 13 face stigma, denial of abortion and lack of critical care like post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits due to funding cuts. Survivors are left unprotected, even in displacement. Legal protections remain weak or inaccessible. Despite regional and national laws, impunity prevails. As [Equality Now reports](#), rape laws in 45 African countries contain loopholes excusing perpetrators, from legalising marital rape to allowing rapists escape prosecution through marriage to their victims. Courts often require corroboration, disregard consent in coercive contexts or base judgments on victims' 'moral' character. Even where laws exist, stigma, fear and lack of survivor support prevent justice.

International peacekeeping forces, meant to protect civilians, have sometimes perpetrated the very violations they are mandated to prevent. Back in the [days in the Central African Republic](#), peacekeepers deployed under the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (UN MINUSCA), including French Sangaris forces, were accused of sexually exploiting children in [camps like M'Poko](#), often in exchange for food. Despite the UN's ['zero tolerance' policy](#), legal loopholes and jurisdictional failures mean most perpetrators face no consequences.

Silence enables: courage resists

The silence surrounding rape is not only due to stigma and fear, but also political. Peace negotiations often treat sexual violence as collateral damage, excluding survivors from the table and prioritising elite reconciliation over justice. Yet resistance persists. In [DRC](#), health and social workers operate on the frontlines with compassion, often unpaid. In Sudan, [children are speaking out](#). The African Union (AU) has attempted to respond with the adoption of the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls ([AUCEVAWG](#)). However, without publication, domestication and enforcement, the treaty remains a paper commitment. Similarly, the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women and the UN's Women, Peace and Security Agenda offer frameworks for action, but implementation remains fragmented and weak.

Confronting the shadow war: a human rights-based response

Normalisation of rape in conflict zones is a deliberate tactic of warfare which demands robust, coordinated responses. Political and military actors must prioritise CSV in peace negotiations and security sector reforms. This includes mandating investigations into sexual violence, prosecuting perpetrators (including state actors and peacekeepers) and vetting security personnel to exclude known abusers. Justice must be both judicial and restorative. International courts must prosecute crimes against humanity stemming from CRSV, but justice also lives in the work of community defenders, trauma counsellors and grassroots organisers. These actors must receive the long-term financial, logistical and political support they need. The [African Union](#) and the [United Nations](#) have the responsibility and the tools to deploy civilian protection missions that are specifically mandated to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence.

At the centre of this response must be the voices of survivors themselves. They are not passive recipients of aid or afterthoughts in peacebuilding processes. Their stories are testimony, their truths evidence and their demands the blueprint for justice. Survivors must be heard in safe, confidential, dignified spaces, not retraumatised by systems that prioritise bureaucracy over healing. Justice, too, must be more than a promise. Whether through the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)), regional mechanisms or national courts, perpetrators must be prosecuted. Commanders who authorise, condone or ignore acts of sexual violence should

face targeted sanctions and international censure. Yet justice is not only found in courtrooms. It is in the work of local health and social workers and grassroots responders who carry the burden of care in the midst of war. These frontline defenders, often operating without pay or protection, are the first to hold survivors' hands, treat injuries and listen without judgement. They need sustained funding, training and political support to continue their life saving work. Rape is not a side-effect of war. It is a weapon wielded with precision and impunity in far too many corners of Africa. [Khartoum](#) may not be safe for women today, but what makes it even more dangerous is the world's refusal to act.

Rape as a weapon of war devastates more than bodies: it erodes communities, haunts generations and poisons the possibility of peace. It is warfare without bullets but with scars that last lifetimes. It is not incidental but policy and ignoring it ensures its survival. Ending this sexual violence requires not only laws and funding but political courage and moral clarity. Rape in war must be met not with silence but with swift sustained action by states, regional bodies, and the international community. Survivors must no longer stand alone. The fight against this cruelty is not just a women's issue but a matter of justice, peace and humanity and the fight for justice is inevitably a fight for peace.